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PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES RELATED TO READING INSTRUCTION--PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS.

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PUB DATE 5 MAY 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.32 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *PHILOSOPHY, *EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY, READING, READING DEVELOPMENT, *READING INSTRUCTION, READING IMPROVEMENT, *CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED, *MIDDLE CLASS VALUES,

A PHILOSOPHY OF READING IS PRESENTED WHICH CONSIDERS THE COMPONENTS OF THE READING ACT, THE PURPOSES OF READING, AND THE EDUCATIONAL TECHNIQUES THAT PROMISE GREATER READER GROWTH. A PHILOSOPHY OF READING IS CONCERNED WITH THE NATURE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENT ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. AT THE SAME TIME, A PHILOSOPHY OF READING MUST CONSIDER THE NATURE AND DEMANDS OF THE CURRENT SOCIAL ORDER, AND, SO FAR AS POSSIBLE, IT MUST ATTEMPT TO PREDICT CHANGES THAT ARE LIKELY TO OCCUR IN THE DEMANDS OF THAT SOCIAL ORDER DURING THE LIFESPAN OF THE READER. OF CHIEF CONCERN IS THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANING AND HOW MEANING IS ACQUIRED. IT IS STRESSED THAT IN THE PERCEPTUAL PROCESS OF READING AND LISTENING, THE RAW MATERIALS FOR ALL MEANING MUST COME FROM EACH INDIVIDUAL'S ENVIRONMENTALLY DELIMITED EXPERIENCES. THIS CALLS FOR MEETING THE NEEDS OF CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN AS WELL AS THOSE OF MIDDLE-CLASS CHILDREN. SOME GOALS OF READING DEVELOPMENT AND PROPOSED METHODS FOR ATTAINING THEM ARE SUGGESTED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (RH)

ED014389

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IRA

International Reading Association--Seattle

SESSION IV Interdisciplinary Aspects of Reading
(Philosophical and Sociological Influences Related to Reading Instruction
Friday, May 5, 2:30-3:45 p.m.

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS

My special interest over the past several years has been the Psychology of Reading with occasional ventures into reading's sociological determinants. This year, however, president-elect Robinson invited me to talk on the Philosophy of Reading. His assignment has compelled me to consider with some care the possible distinctions between three disciplines--psychology, sociology, and philosophy--each of which contains data and theory of significant interest to teachers of reading.

Let me begin by suggesting how these three areas of knowledge contribute in their special ways to the teaching of reading.

Psychology is concerned with the nature of the individual and how and why he learns. Educational psychology interprets and extends psychological data and principles in an educational setting. In a very real sense a psychology of reading is an educational psychology directed to the tasks of learning to read and reading to learn.

Sociology focuses on the nature of social groups and the impacts of the group on its members. Thus a sociology of reading uses the accumulated data and theory of sociology and educational sociology for its applications to the teaching of reading.

Philosophy assumes responsibility for defining the goals of human behavior and suggests methods for directing behavior toward those goals. In identifying the goals of education and in suggesting the educational methodology for reaching them, educational philosophy must be aware of the nature of the individual and the nature of the social order. It must be concerned with both society's need for each individual to make maximum contributions to the social order and the individual's need to receive optimal benefits from his society.

A philosophy of reading, as a special segment of educational philosophy must consider the components of the reading act, the purposes of reading, and educational techniques that promise greatest reader growth. It must have a proper regard for the nature of the individual and the impact of environment on human development. At the same time a philosophy of reading must consider the nature and demands of the current social order and, so far as possible, it must attempt to predict changes that are likely to occur in the demands of that social order during the life span of the reader.

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As we examine the purposes of reading we recognize that today's society requires that each child shall be educated to a level far above the level required by the society of fifty or even twenty years ago. And we see that today's society is a rapidly changing society. In a changing society the development of high-level reading-listening-thinking skills becomes crucial because change can quickly outmode school-taught basic facts and principles and make necessary the constant relearning of specific job skills and even professional knowledge long before a worker reaches the end of his years of greatest productivity. In other words today's technological changes increasingly outdistance schoolroom education.

As we have recognized here, a total philosophy of reading must be concerned with many components of the reading act, the various purposes for reading, and with the techniques of effective reading instruction at all age levels. However, we have but a limited period of time available for today's discussion and I believe that our time can best be used for a focus in some detail on a special segment of the philosophy of reading--the reading act's dependence upon meaning and society's role in the provision of that meaning.

Although reading requires sensory reaction to graphic symbols, true reading is a perceptual act. Sensation is merely the trigger. Perception's ammunition is the perceiver's experiential background. Printed symbols have no innate power to convey meaning. They can do little more than evoke whatever stored meanings the perceiving individual already possesses. Thus understanding through reading requires a store of appropriate meanings that the reader himself previously has distilled from his experiences. Perception through reading is possible because these stored meanings tend to be associated with and to be evokable by words.

In the perceptual processes of both reading and listening the meaning that can be evoked in the reader-listener is dependent on the wealth of prior experiences that have become identified with the word and word combinations that are used by the writer or speaker. In one reader-listener a word may evoke no experience, in another no more than a single experience, whereas in still another it may evoke the distilled essence of numerous experiences. Thus when we consider the communicative power of words, the most important factor is the richness and similarity of the experiences underlying the words that are used by the communicators. And as we discuss the important of meaningfulness, it is well to note that words not only are the tools of communication--words also are the tools of thinking. This recognition that, without appropriate prior experiences, words are but barren symbols, compels us to be concerned with society's responsibility to provide each child with an evnironment rich in the experiences required for effective communication. Only by profiding rich experiences for each child can society hope to gain maximum contributions from its members and can each individual receive pptimal benfits from society. The special stock of meanings that a child must possess if he is to be successful in school are the heart of what we refer to as intelligence.

Experiential background and intellectual ability are not separate and distinct traits. In fact, except for individual differences in the quality of the sense organs and in general physical soundness and health, experiential background may be the sole determinant of intellectual ability. And experiential background's impact is extended to the individual's motivation to achieve. The individual's interests, life goals, work habits, and his self concept are products of his successes and failures during his environmentally delimited experiences. In short, I believe that environment is the causal factor in producing most, and possibly all, of the educationally important differences among the children who enter our classrooms.

Recently there has been increased emphasis on the fact that educational tests, particularly intelligence tests, reflect differences in experiential background. Because children in the crowded mid-city areas and in culturally impoverished rural areas tend to make low scores, such tests have been called culturally unfair. Unfortunately, however, whenever tests fail to reflect the impact of cultural disadvantage, they fail at the same time to predict school success at any level, elementary through college, in our typically middle-class schools. A search for culture-fair tests then, even though directed by high principles of fairness to children, adolescents, and adults of all cultures, may merely obstruct our view of the real problem. It seems likely that it is our educational system, particularly our failure to provide appropriate experience before the child enters school, that is culturally unfair and our various tests of ability and achievment merely reveal that unfairness!

The typical school of today does a reasonably good job of educating the children of our middle and upper classes. Its hours and its curriculum have been planned for children of educated parents from homes equipped with library, play equipment, and study space, and for children who have had special experiences such as summer travel and play experiences with children from middle-class background who speak a middle-class language. Unfortunately, our schools are failing to meet the needs of vast numbers of those children who lack the home and community experiences of the typical middle-class child.

To atack ignorance among culturally disadvantaged children and to help them acquire the meanings needed for success in reading and other areas of educational achievement, we must create an educational system that can be tailored to the specific needs of each child that it serves. To remove unfairness, we must recognize that maximal educational opportunity for all requires greatly unequal educational offerings.

Near the turn of the century no more than ten per cent of our high-school age youth were in school. At that time man's muscles furnished a major portion of the power required to produce his needed food, clothing, and housing. Society at that time did not require universal education beyond the lower grades.

Today man's muscle produces far less than one per cent of the power required for meeting his needs. And in the United States more than 90 per cent of all youth of ages 14 through 17 are in school. Our society certainly can afford to educate all youth through the high-school years and greatly needs the higher-level work and citizenship skills that can result from this education. However, we must be disturbed by the fact that too many of these young persons fail to do well in school and merely serve their time there as they wait to reach the age at which they can legally leave.

If we are to provide each youth with an effective preparation for life, changes must be made and many of these changes must occur long before the high-school years. In making these changes we must recognize that much more is needed than simply supplying culturally disadvantaged children with middle-class schools.

In providing equal opportunity nothing is more unequal than equal facilities. The school curriculum, materials, buildings, and teachers must be planned to fit specifically the experiential background and needs of the children who are to be educated. Probably we have done a reasonably good job in the planning of curriculum and in the training of teachers for those children who have lived since infancy in a middle-class home and community background. What we must recognize is that when appropriate experiences are not provided by the home and the community, these experiences must be provided by the school. The age at which preschool and school experiences begin, the nature of such experiences, the length of his school day and week, and the months of his school year must be planned to suit the needs of the child. For the culturally disadvantaged child, school-planned experiences starting at age six or even at age five are almost certainly too late; and five hours a day, five days a week, and nine or even ten months a year is too little. And if we must offer him middle-class teachers with middle-class backgrounds and values--and presently we have little else to offer--somehow his teachers must be taught to know and value his culture, his language, and his needs. Better still, our efforts must be extended to recruit and train a multitude of teachers who grew up in his culture, who will live in his community, who will be identification symbols for him, and who will have a genuine acceptance of him, his parents, and his peers.

To be culturally fair, our schools must be designed to build on the strengths and to remedy as many weaknesses as possible in the experiential background for education that each child's home and community provides for him. The achievement of this objective promises a better educational program for children of all cultures--advantaged as well as disadvantaged.

Traditionally the American educational system has been thought of as a ladder up which a child may climb as far as his energy and his ability allow. However, in offering all children essentially the same ladder we find the rungs too far apart for the culturally disadvantaged. In addition, this ladder has been so greased with middle-class values

and expectancies that most disadvantaged children have found its climbing impossible or unworthy of their efforts.

In addition to the provision of teachers who know and value the child and his culture, many of the changes that we must make are fairly obvious and some are being implemented. Operation Head Start is an exciting development although so far it is starting too late, stopping too soon, offering too little, and, frequently, there is a distressing lack of coordination between it and the school's program for kindergarten and the primary grades.

Suggestions are being heard for year-around schools for the disadvantaged. An extended school year, coupled with more extensive use of the school facilities during the school day and week and the provision of skilled teaching and supervisory help for the extended day and week, could be important forces in creating a culturally fair educational system.

As I see it, our major task must be to provide appropriate experiences during the child's foundation years. If these foundation years are inadequate, no amount of "shoring up" during later years can produce a structurally sound educational edifice. In addition, effort must be expended to identify and make attractive those educational goals that are attainable by the typical culturally disadvantaged child. Certainly some of these children with proper schooling can and should achieve professional status. And the provision of appropriate early experiences will allow many more of them to do so. Professional status, however, should not be the only socially approved goal even for children from the homes of professional persons. Skilled laborers, trained office workers, technicians, and owners of small business are legitimate and rewarding educational products.

To be comepletely successful, the provision of experiences that build the background of meaning required by the perceptual processes of reading and listening must begin when the child is born. Ideally, it should begin before that time with better education for his parents. For the intellectual, social, and emotional development of the individual, no other year of life is as important as the first year. The sensory, motor, and emotional experiences of the first year lay the foundation on which the experiences of the second year build. Thus, each year of life, important as it is, probably is less important than was the preceding year.

Meaning is built on prior meaning. Once deficiencies in experiential background arise, they prevent the attainment of full benefit from later experiences. It is for this reason that educators have found that individual differences in achivement increase rather than decrease as children grow older.

Obviously, our examination of the philosophy of reading has had to be limited. We have been concerned here with the importante of

meaning and how meaning is acquired. We have recognized that in the perceptual processes of reading and listening the raw materials for all meaning must come from each individual's environmentally delimited experiences. We have noted society's need for good readers and have recognized each individual's great need for high-level reading skills in order to receive optimal benefits from his society.

In keeping with the responsibility of a philosophy of reading, we have suggested goals of reading development and proposed methods for attaining them.

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